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Bowling Green refugees share experiences in adapting to new home

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Sajjad Afzali (from left), Mariia Novoselia and Tahir “Taz” Zukic, all refugees, speak with moderator John Sunnygard at a panel Monday night in the Knicely Conference Center.

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A trio of refugees got to share the challenges and successes – big and small – of adapting to life in Bowling Green Monday evening.

The panel, held in the Knicely Conference Center on Western Kentucky University's South Campus, came about in collaboration between WKU's Office of Global Learning & International Affairs and the City of Bowling Green's International Communities Liaison Division.

John Sunnygard, WKU's associate provost of global learning and international affairs, moderated the night's activity.

"We intentionally wanted to be away from the university even though this is a university facility, tonight, so that it really is a community event and not a Western Kentucky event," Sunnygard said. "This is Bowling Green. This is Kentucky. That's who we are tonight."

The three refugees on the panel were Tahir "Taz" Zukic, founder of Taz Trucking and WKU students Mariia Novoselia and Sajjad Afzali.

Zukic came to Bowling Green in 2000 as a refugee from war in Bosnia. He brought nothing with him, but through hard work and sacrifice he founded Taz Trucking, which now employs over 160 people.

He originally found work in a factory in Scottsville, but was barely making enough to support his wife and two children. He took out a \$3,000 loan to spend a few weeks in Jacksonville, Florida, because there he could earn his commercial driver's license with the help of a Bosnian translator.

After this, he hit the open road as a long haul trucker. But it wasn't long until Zukic bought a truck of his own.

"In 2003 we just decided to buy one truck. I just started to drive this truck, we borrowed money from the bank," he said. "From that point I just continued to drive, thinking that I can maybe operate (my) own business."

His operation has since grown from one truck to 120, with over 250 trailers.

"I traveled all across America through every big city and I see a lot more opportunities for people here in Bowling Green," Zukic said.

Mariia Novoselia, an exchange student from Ukraine, came to WKU in January of 2022. Russia's invasion of her home country a month later has kept her in the United States ever since.

She said when the invasion began, she remembers a wave of messages from friends, classmates and professors checking in on her.

"I remember not really being able to reply to those messages and emails at that moment, but I remember reading them and having this slight feeling of hope," Novoselia said. "What has helped me the most is the community and navigating this community together."

Some of the things she had to adjust to included U.S. taxes, the American healthcare system when dealing with a chipped tooth and having to build her schedule for future semesters once it became clear she would not be returning home when planned.

“I like to say that the universe likes to surprise me and both the universe and I have very interesting senses of humor,” Novoselia said. “But one of the dreams that I have had, and always have had, and hopefully always will have; I would like to be someone who really creates change in the world.”

Afzali has only been in the U.S. for a handful of months. He fled his home country of Afghanistan when the Taliban regained control of the country in 2021 and spent a short period in Iraq before arriving in Bowling Green.

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Back home his plan was to work in art and graphic design, something he said is underrepresented in Afghanistan.

“Although I’ve been here for a really (short) amount of time, I’m still trying to figure out what I want and what I’m planning, but I do think often about starting a business here in Bowling Green because I am really liking the city,” Afzali said.

For Afzali, joining WKU’s Muslim Student Association was a quick way for him to find a sense of community.

“As a Muslim, we do have a big shared thing which is our religion, and besides that most of the students in the MSA are international students,” he said. “So we again share some kind of same background and we in some way understand each other more. Being a part of them has helped me a lot.”

Bowling Green Mayor Todd Alcott and Will Spalding, principal of the GEO International High School of Warren County Public Schools, were also part of the panel.

Alcott recalled growing up with refugee friends and classmates.

“We had Cambodians come to our church, they were learning to speak the language, they came here for jobs,” Alcott said. “And I started going to school with Cambodian friends and we just understood that this was just normal. It went from Cambodians to Laotians, Vietnamese to Bosnians and our community continues to grow with different ethnicities.”

Spalding said the high school serves about 150 students and close to 30 countries are represented. Kentucky law states the school can only offer education up until a student turns 21, putting pressure on educators to help as much as possible before time runs out.

“When a refugee comes into the country, the federal government doesn’t say ‘oh, school starts in August so let’s get you there in August so you can start on time,’ ” he said. “Students will come all throughout the school year ... they have to start as freshmen so we’re on a strict time crunch.”

Also on the panel was Dr. Diya Abdo, an English professor at Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina, daughter of Palestinian refugees and founder of the Every

Campus a Refuge organization. ECAR calls on universities to work with local refugee resettlement agencies to provide radical hospitality to displaced peoples.

Abdo said ECAR was inspired by Pope Francis' 2015 call for European parishes to host refugee families. Since university campuses already offer housing, food, recreation and education, why not use them to aid in resettlement?

"I was really inspired by that remarkable invocation of small communities to do the work of welcome," Abdo said.

Abdo touched on the expectations placed on refugees, such as speedy self-sufficiency and repayment of their stipends.

"Self-sufficiency means that 90 days after your arrival, you are financially independent. You don't need any money to be able to survive," she said. "And so I want you to imagine the possibilities for that when you're a refugee ... you have left much behind. What you have taken with you is probably trauma."

A unique challenge refugees to Kentucky face is the inability to have a translator present when taking the road portion of a driver's license exam. Alcott said that is a conversation he can have with local legislators to push for change.

Nancy Zimpher, interim director of the National Association of System Heads, was also in attendance for the event. WKU's Resilient Refugee Program, which offers English language instruction and peer-to-peer support, was recognized in the first round of the NASH Catalyst Fund in January.

"You are a leader, the leader in state-funded scholarships for refugees as they resettle in his state," Zimpher said. "... We're looking for people who may not get the recognition they deserve for the amazing work they do against all odds, and that's you."

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